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## The question of method: practice, reflexivity and critique in visual culture studies

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## **The question of method: practice, reflexivity and critique in visual culture studies**

Mieke Bal's essay 'Visual essentialism and the object of visual culture' is a rigorous commentary on what Bal calls 'the primary pain point' of visual culture studies (Bal, 2003: 6). Bal argues that visual culture studies are founded on the specificity of their object of study, but at the same time are unclear about exactly what that object is. Hence their 'pain', inflicted on Bal at least by the range of 'unquestioned assumptions' and even 'blatant nonsense' that substitute in visual culture studies for careful consideration of that object (Bal 2003: 11, 12). Bal offers her own analgesic, suggesting that the proper object of study for visual culture studies should in fact be a non-object: 'visuality' itself. For Bal, visuality becomes an object of study in moments of seeing, or 'visual event[s]' (9), when, in an encounter between a human subject and another entity, something emerges as 'a fleeting, fugitive subjective image accrued in the subject' (9). Her interest is therefore as much in 'performing acts of seeing' as in 'the materiality of the object seen' (11).

This essay uses Bal's argument to consider what Bal calls 'the question of method' (Bal 2003: 23). In her essay, Bal claims that 'methodological reflection cannot be avoided at this time' (23), and, indeed, 'method' is central to all of her work (as the collection of her essays edited by Norman Bryson attests [Bal and Bryson 2001]). It is therefore entirely typical that she should introduce her concern with the 'visual event' and with 'performing acts of seeing' in the form of a question serving to generate particular sorts of evidence: with methodology, in other words. Her question is this: 'what happens when people look, and what emerges from that act?' (Bal 2003: 9). And her essay is structured such that its arguments culminate in a section entitled 'the question of method'; 'methodology' is also a key word of her essay.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, of the seven essays published in response to Bal, only three engage with the question of methodology, and that only very briefly: for example, in Griselda Pollock's passing and approving reference to 'modes of analysis' that 'reframe Art History's

precious authored objects as texts and theoretical practices' (Pollock 2003: 259). I want to make three points in relation to this apparent uninterest in questions of methodology by Bal and her respondents. Firstly, I think Bal is correct to place so much importance on methodology, and I hope it will be obvious by the end of the chapter why this is the case. Secondly, though, it seems to me that the uninterest in questions of method shown by the responses to Bal's paper is symptomatic of a much wider uninterest in questions of method across the field of visual culture studies more generally (which is hardly surprising, since all of her respondents have been extremely influential in visual culture studies). Thirdly, this lack of interest in discussing questions of methodology seems to be caused by the hegemony of an implicit methodology. So for all the talk of interdisciplinarity and what can be done differently by working across established research boundaries, visual culture studies, I suggest, has remarkably little interest in methodological discussion or experimentation. So, for example, Pollock's refusal, quoted above, to consider art objects as objects denies the relevance to visual culture studies of a body of work which does indeed treat artworks (and other sorts of visualised materials) as objects, and also precisely as a means of avoiding questions of preciousness, authorship, aesthetics and connoisseurship. I am thinking here of work in anthropology, inspired in different ways by the work of Alfred Gell (1998) and Arjun Appadurai (1986), among others, in which art is seen as less a matter of textual meaning and much more as a matter of social doing. In this work, artworks, and other visual objects, are conceptualised as visual objects possessing agency which, when encountered, produce compressed performances with social effect (for example Myers 2001; Pinney 2003, 2005; Poole 1997; Thomas 1991).<sup>2</sup> Yet this anthropological work is rarely referred to in visual culture studies (one exception being Bal herself).<sup>3</sup> Nor does the well-established field of audience studies (see Gillespie 2005) make much of an appearance in discussions of visual culture.

This current lack of methodological debate has certain consequences for what visual culture studies can do. The first part of this chapter sketches the characteristics of the implicit methodology that dominates visual culture studies, as I see it, and examines what sort of criticism it produces, what sort of objects of study, and what kind of critic. I should say at once though that my aim is not to dismiss these critical positions and projects in any way. As Pollock says, 'there have to be sites of critical

contestation of what is at stake in the ideological investments in high culture and the global capital investments in popular culture' (Pollock 2003: 259); and any site, using whatever methods, that achieves such contestation – as so much excellent work in visual culture studies has already done – is surely to be valued. However, particular methods achieve particular ends. And while the implicit methodology of so much visual culture studies to date has been very effective at certain forms of critique, it is perhaps time to ask whether that methodology alone remains fully adequate to addressing visual culture in all its richness and complexity. In particular, it seems to me that if visual culture needs to explore the rather different territory of visual events and performances of seeing – as, following Bal and others, I think it must – then different methodologies may well be required.

So in the second section of the paper, I build on aspects of Bal's own methodology. But this paper is not absolutely faithful to Bal's position (if such a thing were possible). This is partly because her own methodology has already been elaborated by Norman Bryson (2001), and there seems little point in repeating his remarks. More significantly, though, as Bryson notes, Bal's methodology is based on examining the logic of 'discourse, enunciation and voice' as 'they are focalized or embedded in the actual discursive situation' (Bryson 2001: 19). If visual culture studies is fully to engage with the consequences of Bal's move towards performance and event, this paper suggests that it also needs some methodological resources to enable it to say more than Bal can about the 'actual situation' emergent upon specific acts of seeing. These resources, I suggest, would focus less on the logic of 'discourse, enunciation and voice', and more on the logics of discourse, practice and place. In other words, I am suggesting that if visual culture studies is to look more closely at visibility as an event, it would benefit from being able to ask questions about the particularities of events as they take place in different locations with diverse human and artefactual actants.

## **The implicit methodology of visual culture studies: another kind of connoisseurship?**

To attempt to describe the taken-for-granted methodology of visual culture studies is clearly fraught with difficulties. Works that might count as visual culture studies are numerous, diverse, and spread far and wide; and the field has not been, and is not, without any methodological discussion whatsoever. My strategy here is to take just a couple of examples of visual culture criticism, and to suggest what is typical about their critical methodologies. The examples come from an influential textbook and a body of criticism addressing one sort of visual object.

The first example is a highly respected textbook on visual culture: *Practices of Looking*, written by Maria Sturken and Lisa Cartwright (2001). As its title suggests, this book argues strongly that visual objects, in and of themselves, carry little inherent meaning; 'one of the central tenets of this book is that meaning does not reside within images, but is produced at the moment that they are consumed by and circulated among viewers' (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 7). That is, meaning is made through social practices. Hence the title of their second chapter, 'Viewers make meaning'. But here their argument slips. It moves away from the viewers and their making, and towards the interpretation of images' meanings as conducted by the critic. This happens because Sturken and Cartwright argue that there are in fact three sites at which the meaning of an image is reached – through its viewers' interpretations, but also through the meanings it carries itself, and the context in which an image is seen – and it is the critic's task to unpack 'the complex social relationship' between these three sites in relation to a variety of media and genres of visual images (45).

In making this claim, Sturken and Cartwright undoubtedly offer a nuanced and critical account of visual culture. Their account has three features, though, that deserve emphasis. Firstly, they focus heavily on the question of meaning. Producers' meanings, viewers' meanings, dominant-hegemonic, negotiated or oppositional meanings, ideological meanings... This search for the meaning of visual materials is indeed at the heart of most visual culture studies, and Sturken and Cartwright (2001: 45-71) helpfully point out where this methodology comes from: Stuart Hall's 1974

essay on the coding and decoding of meanings, in which semiology and Foucauldian discourse analysis sit rather uneasily side-by-side (Nightingale 1996). I agree that the theoretical roots of visual culture studies's implicit methodology do indeed lie in a usually unproblematised conflation of a watered-down semiology with a thinned-out version of discourse analysis. The second feature of Sturken and Cartwright's (2001: 45-71) account that is characteristic of visual culture studies more generally is their slip from viewers making meaning to the critic's interpretive role. For while viewers in their account make meaning in theory, actual viewers are given very little say in their book. The subtle audience ethnographies undertaken by scholars such as Valerie Walkerdine (1990) or Marie Gillespie (1995), for example, are nowhere to be found in their account.<sup>4</sup> The third feature is also an absence: that of the visual culture studies critic. For surely there are actually four sites of meaning-making, the fourth being the critic who interprets the 'junctures and articulations of visual culture' (Bal 2003: 21).

These three aspects of visual culture studies' methodology – a focus on meaning and interpretation, the absence of actual audiences, and a certain invisibility on the part of the critic – are accompanied by a fourth, which again is a legacy from Hall's version of cultural studies: a search for critique. This is particularly evident in my next example, which is a body of work addressing public art.

I'll begin with a quotation from a book chapter written by Patricia Phillips, a distinguished writer on public art (Phillips 2003). She is discussing a mosaic in a subway station in New York called *Oculus*. Two artists photographed eyes of schoolchildren in the city, and made mosaics from the photos. Here is what Phillips says about the mosaic:

Historically, eyes have been endowed with symbolic significance. They are windows to the soul, the centre of individual identity. The eyes – in fact, hundreds of pairs of individuals' eyes – offer compelling information about gender, race and ethnicity as physical attributes and social constructions. The eyes of the city's children are poignant representations of its vigorous diversity. Clearly, the gaze can be intrusive and aggressive, but *Oculus* sensitively demonstrates that it can

also be compassionately connective. The project is a moving and generous image of the multiple dimensions of contemporary public life. (Phillips 2003: 125)

Innocuous enough. But this quote seems to me to share the methodological approach of Sturken and Cartwright (2001). Clearly, Phillips too is concerned about the meaning of this artwork. In explicating its meaning, she is typical in the way she discusses a number of different aspects of the work located at one or other of Sturken and Cartwrights' three sites: its formal qualities and historical references, its institutional context and its critical reception. In this particular example, I'd point to phrases like '*historically, eyes have been endowed with symbolic significance*', which demonstrates the critic's knowledge of historical scholarship and cultural context. The effects of these sites are integrated (implicitly) via the critic's theoretical apparatus, with the phrases 'gender, race and ethnicity as physical attributes and social constructions' and 'representations of its *vigorous* diversity' both implying the work of the critic in placing *Oculus* in relation to a specific kind of cultural theory and politics. As a consequence of this analysis of the work's meaning, the reader is then told what the effects of this work of art are. '*Oculus sensitively demonstrates that the gaze can also be compassionately connective*'; 'the project *is* a moving and generous image of the multiple dimensions of contemporary public life'. Once again, there is no discussion of what other viewers (subway users, for example) might be making of it, and no reflection on the critic's method of reaching her conclusions.

In this example, it is also particularly clear that public art is being judged on the grounds of its political effect. In this case, Phillips claims that the mosaic represents public life as vigorously and multiply gendered and racialised, and assumes that this is a good thing. As Grant Kester points out in his book *Conversation Pieces* (2004), one criteria that dominates most (modernist) art criticism methodology is precisely whether an artwork resists 'dominant meanings', howsoever defined. The most highly valued artworks produced by much art criticism are those which are seen to resist the production of hegemonic meaning, to refuse to reproduce discourse, to destabilise the power-knowledge nexus. Critics expect that 'the work of art should challenge or disrupt the viewer's expectations about a given image, object, or system of meaning' (Kester 2004: 17). This expectation very much at work in discussions of

what constitutes good public art, and, I would argue, in visual culture studies more generally. So, take just three of examples, Phillips (1996: 61) says that public art 'can be a form of radical education that challenges the structures and conditions of cultural and political institutions', Suzanne Lacey (1995: 13) claims that it should imply or state ideas about social change, and Jane Rendell (1999: 4) says that public art should provide 'moments, places and tools for self-reflection, critical thinking and radical practice'. In similar fashion, visual culture studies' implicit methodology also praises critique in the objects it sees. The objects that it valorises are those that pull their viewers out of their ordinary values and perceptions, and that is its fourth characteristic.<sup>5</sup>

Now, clearly such criticism is a valuable skill for building those 'sites of contestation' demanded by Pollock and many other visual culture critics. However, we should perhaps be more aware than we are of some of its implications. One implication in particular deserves more attention, I think, which is the way in which this methodology enables its particular sort of critic to ignore what Toby Miller (2001) calls the 'occasionality' of 'visual events', in all their extraordinary variety. By 'occasionality', Miller means 'the conditions under which a text is made, circulated, received, interpreted, and criticized, taking seriously the conditions of existence of cultural production' (306). I would emphasise the importance of where a particular visual event takes place in particular: the 'same' object may participate in quite different visual events when it is in a family album and when it becomes part of mass media discourse of grief and blame (Rose forthcoming). Yet the semiological-discursive methodology of visual culture studies makes the occasionality of visual events difficult to explore. The focus on meaning and interpretation tends to lead to a methodological focus on the formal qualities and discursive context of visual objects; the uninterest in audiences leads to art objects in particular to being read as if where they were (not) seen was irrelevant; and the uninterest in the specific conditions and processes in which the critic is working produces claims about the meaning inherent to visual objects which ignores the particular conditions under which that claim is made. As Miller (2001: 307) notes, film theorists, for example, never discuss what difference it makes to their interpretation of 'the' meaning of a film that they watched it on a dvd-player, repeatedly, on their own, in an office or study – rather than seeing it once, on a large screen, at a packed multiplex on a



Saturday night. Finally, the urge to see things as critical means that vast swathes of visual events have simply never made it onto the visual studies agenda.

But if we think of an installation in an art gallery, or a family photograph album, or the latest blockbuster at a multiplex, and think of them, not solely in terms of their formal properties and philosophical implications, but also as located social, affective and economic events, then we will produce a rather different account of them: an account that can consider the importance of institutional context, of the people who funded, installed and looked at them, of the corporeal and discursive gestures and comportments by which they happen. We then start to have a rather different sense of such objects and how they are visible: not simply as objects to be interpreted, but as remarkably complex objects that came into being only through the participation of numerous actors, both human and non-human. We might then also be more inclined to consider the critic as one of those actors, and reflect more carefully on their role.

In contrast to this approach to visual culture – which I will develop in the next section – I'd like to name visual culture studies' implicit methodology as a newer kind of connoisseurship. 'Connoisseurship', in its traditional sense, involves detecting the influences of other artists on a particular artwork, through the deployment of what Irit Rogoff (1998) has called 'the good eye'. As Rogoff says, this eye does its work mysteriously, apparently intuitively evaluating the provenance and quality of an art work. What I have been describing in this section might be described as the effect of 'the good theory', which is mobilised in an equally unreflexive manner to produce an equally perceptive critic who can reveal the meaning and critical effect of visual materials. The creation of this critical position is surely in part at least a consequence of visual culture critics' uninterest in methodology. Visual culture critics tend to write as if their judgement was self-evident, the only one possible, as if their account of a visual work is a process of description or revelation rather than construction. It isn't of course, as I'm sure if directly asked they would readily admit – it's a result of years of training in disciplinary conventions (particularly the 'textualist and historical side to the humanities' [Miller 2001: 305]), of archival research, of teaching and being taught, of conference going and so on. And there have been some worries recently that, if you like, too much work has to be brought to bear on a visual object to work

out what it means. Sometimes this expresses itself in a concern that images end up merely illustrating theoretical accounts (Pinney 2003; Bal 2003: 23); sometimes it takes the form of various worries that visual things are all too rarely allowed to exceed or escape interpretive frameworks (Holly in Cheetham, Holly and Moxey 2005; Farago and Zwijnenberg 2003; Mitchell 1996); sometimes a frustration at how the rich diversity of actual visualities keep on being straightjacketed into a limited conceptual language (Maynard 2007). And with this suggestion that some methodological debate in visual culture studies has not been, and is not, non-existent, the next section returns to Mieke Bal's work.

### **Towards a methodology for performing acts of seeing**

So far, I've suggested that the implicit methodology of visual culture studies is producing a certain sort of approach to visual culture. It is an approach that values objects that critique the dominant power relations in that context and that privileges only the critic's interpretations of object and context. Productive as that methodology is, there are other ways of thinking about visual events and the objects entangled in them, that allow us to see other things and occupy other critical positions. This section develops this suggestion, returning to some of Bal's insights but taking them in a rather different direction.

#### *Practice*

As should be obvious by now, I find Bal's concern with visual events and 'the practices of looking invested in any object' (Bal 2003:11) very productive. In particular, her use of the term 'practice' can open up a rather different approach to visual culture studies, different both from its implicit methodology but also rather different from Bal's own approach. Here, I want to suggest that the social sciences might have something to offer visual culture methodologies. In particular, the current interest in 'practice' among a range of social theorists offers some ways of approaching the occasionality of visual events.

In the social sciences, the notion of 'practice' has a complex theoretical genealogy. Importantly, it is not opposed to discourse: indeed, Foucault's work might be read as

an extended meditation on practices as power (Laurier and Philo 2004). However, the current interest in practice certainly draws on more than just Foucault for its theoretical underpinnings: Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu, de Certeau, Appadurai, Ingold and a group of science studies writers including Latour and Serres all make their appearance in discussions of practice (for a review see Reckwitz 2002). A succinct definition of practice is offered by Theodore Schatzki (1996: 83), who describes a social practice as a cluster of 'doings and sayings'. Andreas Reckwitz (2002: 249) elaborates:

A 'practice'... is a routinised type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, 'things' and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge.

A practice, then, is a fairly consistent way of doing something, deploying certain objects, knowledges, bodily gestures and emotions. It is through practices that social relations and institutions happen, and through practices that subject positions and identities are performed. From this, it becomes possible to see how Miller's 'occasionality' might be pushed from his cultural-materialist account of 'context' to a rather more radical account of how seeing happens. For now we can suggest that different ways of seeing are bound up into different, more-or-less conscious, more-or-less elaborate, more-or-less consistent practices. Visualities are one practice among many, and in their routinisation and place-specificity they make certain sorts of things visible in particular ways.

There are two things to emphasise here. Firstly, practices are always embedded in specific places. The different visualities mobilised in a shopping centre (Becker 2002; Degen, DeSilvey and Rose 2008) are not the same as the visualities in an art gallery (Heath and vom Lehn 2004) or a train (Bissell 2009) or an expo (Jansson 2007a), because the practices in those sorts of place are not the same. There are two dynamics here (see also Jansson 2007b). Firstly, particular locations usually invite quite specific performances of seeing (which include specific modes of bodily and other sensorial comportments). Sitting in a cinema seat, the etiquette of where to

put coats and bags, what to eat and drink there and how, when you can talk and when you shouldn't, the specific kinds of gazes given to films (as opposed to invited by them, about which we know a lot)... all these things are peculiar to cinemas, and vary between different cinemas. Anna McCarthy's book on *Ambient Television* (2001) demonstrates the place-specificity of practices of looking in a different way, by unpacking the different modes of visuality structuring television programmes made for specific locations, such as airport lounges, hospital waiting rooms and checkout queues. Her study explores the co-constitution of non-domestic tv genres and the places in which they are shown very effectively (though, typically, she doesn't say much about how the people in these places practice the tv). Secondly, though, it is the practices undertaken in those places which reproduce them as those sorts of spaces (or not). If everyone started to wander in and out of all the cinemas in a multiplex just like they wander in and out of galleries in a museum, strolling down a side aisle, along the front and up the other side, inspecting the walls all the while, it would no longer be a cinema. Practices of looking, then, are also about the practising of places.

This emphasis on place is not simply a question of the spaces in which visual events take place, however. The sorts of geographies practically constituted through such events may well exceed the immediate location of their event. Divya Tolia-Kelly's (2004) work, for example, on how diasporic identities are mobilised through various decorative objects in migrants' houses, tells of an intimate imbrication of certain domestic and global spatialities. Thus the space performed by practices, including visual practices, is not necessarily a simple question of location (an altarpiece in a church versus an image of that altarpiece on a tourist website). It might also entail all sorts of other geographies, of various geometries and modalities.

Secondly, the performativity of practice. That is (following Butler 1990), practices produce the entities that are claimed to pre-exist the practice. While both, say, a Caravaggio painting and a gallery visitor (Bal 1996: 117-128), or an on-line game and a gamer, may seem to exist prior to their mutual encounters, they do not; they constitute each other as they interact (and such interactions are not only visual, of course). Hence practices are relational. 'Performing acts of seeing' produce both seer and seen (Bal 2003: 11, 14). And as performative, practices both discipline

these positions but slippages in their reproduction also occur. Bal has in fact offered examples of both of these possibilities, in the organisation of New York's museum district which inscribes a racialised distinction between Nature and Culture in the separate buildings of the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Bal 1996:15-36), and the relation between two paintings and their apparatus of display in one corner of a gallery (Bal 1996: 117-28).

What this broad approach means for visual culture studies is significant, I would argue. Firstly, it changes the basic question from 'what does this visual thing mean?' to something much closer to Bal's formulation, 'what happens when people look, and what emerges from that act?' (Bal 2003: 9). Further, in suggesting that visualities themselves are practices, it immediately raises the question of the location of those practices. In an age when images are increasingly mobile across different media and sites of display, this becomes a pressing question to be able to ask. And, thirdly, a whole range of social actors make an appearance. This includes the visual culture critic, as the next sub-section elaborates. But it also includes, I would argue, all those other folk who encounter all sorts of visual things, in all sorts of ways, in everyday ways, and it suggests that their ways of seeing are just as central to a visual event as those of the critic. In short, 'practice' can turn visual culture studies closer to the sites and inhabitants of the everyday (Highmore 2002).

### *Reflexivity*

Bal's argument has a certain version of reflexivity at its heart, and, like her emphasis on practice, this also has significant implications for the work of critical interpretation typical of so much of visual culture studies. Simply, reflexivity is central to Bal's position because visual culture critics are also people doing specific kinds of looking in particular places. The critic is not exempt from, or outside of, Bal's understanding of visibility as practice. Hence the work of critics must also be considered as embodied, located, relational and performative. Critics cannot simply apply their critical-theoretical tools onto objects understood as existing prior to the moment of criticism. Instead, objects are brought into particular forms of being through the act of criticism.

The so-called empirical object does not exist 'out there' but is brought into existence in the encounter between object and analyst, mediated by the theoretical baggage each brings to that encounter. This transforms the analysis from an instrumentalist 'application' into a performative interaction between the object (including those aspects of it that remained invisible before the encounter), theory and analyst. In this view, processes of interpretation are part of the object and are, in turn, questioned on the side of the analyst. (Bal 2003: 23-4)

The analyst brings certain questions and theories to bear on their object of study, and, Bal argues, the object often answers back, offering a particular and productive version of itself in this exchange from which the critic should learn (and hence Bal notes that 'some specificity for material objects must be retained' [Bal 2003: 15]). This understanding of the critic as essentially entangled in what they are studying is very different from the distanced analytical stand offered by connoisseurs of visual culture. It places the analyst much more in the midst of things, a participant in visualities rather than their detached observer.

Given this entanglement, Bal argues that an 'element of self-reflection is indispensable' to critical work (Bal, 2003: 24). But Bal has quite a specific understanding of reflexivity. Reflexion, for Bal, means thinking of interpretive practices as both 'method and object of questioning' (24). This sort of self-reflection is central to several other accounts of performative research methodologies (see for example Gregson and Rose 1999; Pratt 2000; Latham 2003). Aspects of methodology are paused over, examined, rehearsed and revised, as the research process proceeds and things are learnt from the research objects. No longer simply passing a verdict in the mode of a 'colonising humanist' (Pratt 2000: 639), the critic is now required to work through the process of reaching that verdict, demonstrating that it was attained through a series of specific interactions rather than from a series of cumulative revelations.

In my own work on what a particular group of mothers did with their family photos, for example, I interviewed women in their houses, looked at lots of their photos with them, and then worked with interview transcripts and notes. Eventually I made a

number of claims about the effects of family photos for these mothers, one of which depended on just such a moment of self-reflection. It wasn't until I'd been working with the transcripts for a couple of months that I suddenly realised that, in all the hours of conversation poring over thousands of photos, one topic was hardly ever discussed: what the children pictured so often felt about being photographed. It wasn't, it seemed, a pressing issue for the mothers taking the photos – and nor, significantly, had it been for me, as their interviewer, as a researcher working with interview material and also a mother myself. Reflecting on my complicity with this absence, I concluded that our shared uninterest in how children felt suggested that the real subjects of the photos weren't in fact the children at all, but the mothers, and what taking and looking (and holding) photographs of their children meant to them. Questioning the range of my research questions allowed me to begin to explore why it is that, despite their predictable and banal content and its construction of traditional notions of 'the family', commented on by so many visual culture critics, family photos are intensely valued by so many mothers (Rose 2005).

Another implication that needs teasing out from Bal's methodological position is that understanding research in terms of performative practices also makes the conclusions of research rather more provisional. This is not because – as some versions of reflexivity abroad in the social sciences would claim – every person is differently positioned and therefore sees things differently (although in certain circumstances and in specific ways this may well be important). Rather, it is because performances may in principle always be performed differently; there is always the possibility that looking again might change what is seen and unseen. Interpretation is of the moment in which it was undertaken (Latham 2003: 2005). Elsewhere, Bal (1999: 10) argues that this challenge to the epistemic authority of the critic should be central to visual culture studies, and that it can come both from the 'exposed object' and the reader/viewer.

### *Critique*

So far, I have argued that understanding visual culture research as a practice demands a certain reflexivity from the researcher. It does so because it entangles the researcher as much as anyone else in practices and performances of looking.

This is already a form of critique, I think; it offers a critique of those analytical positions that assume they are outside such social practices. It makes the 'third person' approach to visualised objects (Bryson, 2001: 5) much harder, if not impossible, to sustain, and thus challenges those pronouncements, discussed earlier in this paper, about what an image definitively means. But what of social critique? I suggested earlier that much visual culture studies are critical in the sense that they claim to discover the meaning of a visual entity, and then assess whether that meaning supports or criticises hegemonic discourses. But what happens when critique focuses on event rather than meaning – on what happens rather than what is signified? And when the critic places herself in the midst of that happening rather than assuming a position exterior to it? What critical tools does 'practice' offer?

One tool has already been mentioned: performativity. To repeat the familiar argument once more, if something is performed it can always be performed differently. It is an argument that's difficult to disagree with. It's also an argument that makes the critic rather passive, though, simply waiting for practices to be done in a more just or liberatory way. As well as this, I wonder if the observational mode of visual culture studies explored here might be able to offer a rather more active, interventionist form of critique.

Many who have engaged in practice-focussed research do indeed describe their mode of critique as interventionist. Critique as intervention works, not with notions of context and depth, but rather with action and surface. It suggests the need to examine what's going on, what's happening, with great care, and then place what is there into different alignments and combinations, reflexively, with a certain critical aim in mind. Cathrine Egeland describes this approach thus:

Critique as intervention can thus be conceived of as a strategy aimed at describing, redescribing, combining and recombining elements of knowledge that may have critical effects. (Egeland, 2005: 269)

Eric Laurier and Chris Philo, for example, note 'the surplus of detail provided by actual events at hand' (Laurier and Philo, 2004: 431) and advocate pushing description to such an extent that surfaces become troubled by what is already there



but often not noticed, 'things lying in plain view, open to everyone, yet all too often unexamined' (Laurier and Philo, 2004: 430). This is a strategy of critique that's not about going behind or beyond what others ('people') might see, but about working with what is there and changing its emphasis, intensity, relationality. Similarly, although from a Deleuzian direction, Patricia Ticineto Clough (2000: 286) has talked about 'cutting out an apparatus of knowing and observation from a single plane or for differently composing elements of an apparatus with the aim of eliciting exposure or escaping it, intensifying engagement or lessening it'. That notion of 'cutting out' again suggests a strategy of placing things in different arrangements rather than revealing what they really mean. Such estrangements and realignments are what produce a critical effect.

John Allen and Michael Pryke (1993), for example, in a study of the spatialities of the City of London, were particularly interested in the parallel existence of two social worlds in the offices of the financial corporations they were studying. On the one hand, the well-paid world of the bankers: on the other, a world of very low-paid caterers, security guards and cleaners. The bankers' way of seeing their everyday workplace was such that those low-paid workers were simply invisible. They were not seen, and thus the reliance of the bankers upon them was denied. Allen and Pryke intervened in this invisibilisation by making a series of montages of the City space – its buildings and its information flows – into which they gradually inserted more and more evidence of the presence of the low-paid workers. This suggests that montage – whether written or using images – is one tactic of intervention; there are surely others (see for example Markussen, 2005). Critique, then, need not only be a matter of finding a meaning and assessing its effect in relation to wider discursive formations. Critique can also take the form of finding what is already there and rearranging it 'to witness the world into being in quite different... ways' (Dewsbury, 2003: 1908).

## **Conclusion**

One of the aims of this chapter has been to spell out rather more clearly than is usually the case what the implications are of the implicit methodology that dominates a great deal of visual culture studies. For implications it certainly has, both in the

kind of critic it creates, and in the kinds of accounts of visual objects it produces. It focuses almost entirely on the meaning of visual things, it ignores the places in and the subjectivities through which visual events happen, it neglects the particular positioning of the critic, and is desperate to find critique. The work that it does is nonetheless valuable, I would insist. It is important to have engaged and sustained readings of cultural texts that push at superficial understandings and offer new ways of thinking and seeing. I do not want to advocate any one method as inherently 'better' than the other. I simply want to emphasise that methodologies have effects, and that if visual culture studies is to come of age as a truly innovative interdisciplinary subject, it needs to pay much more attention to the consequences of its current implicit methodology, and to explore the interpretive possibilities offered by a range of other methodological strategies.

For there are indeed other ways to engage with those things which can help us by grounding them, not in semiotic or discursive systems of meaning, but in the constellations of practice that bring certain ways of doing things together with certain objects to produce specific subjective and social effects. Images do not happen on their own, ever. Their production, circulation, display and disposal are always in conjunction with people, in places, in mutually-constitutive relations. This theoretical understanding of visualities and visual objects underpins my advocacy here of another methodology for visual culture studies. My argument is that visual culture studies should be plunging much more often into those encounters between humans and what surrounds them, exploring what becomes visible, and in what ways. And from this perspective, the kind of critical work dominating visual culture studies becomes just one quite specific practice among many other kinds, one that produces a particular kind of critic and a particular version of the visual material being studied.

To focus on the practices through which visual events happen is to go detailed. It is to look carefully at bodies, comportments, gestures, looks; to look and touch objects, images, ways of seeing; to consider the routine, the everyday and the banal as well as the exceptional; to consider affect and emotion as well as cognition and representation. It is to pay attention to people's doings and sayings and to watch what eventuates in specific places. It is to allow different modes of reflection – by both the researcher and the researched – on those practices. It is to draw on

ethnographic methods, often, and to reflect on the way in which the critic and their methods are also and always part of what happens. And in focussing on such details, as the thick descriptive methods of both some anthropology and science studies shows, is absolutely not to lose sight of questions of power. Indeed, looking carefully at how people look and what happens when they look is to address with some specificity the highly complex and mutable visual practices that are part of power relations, as Foucault surely taught us. If you want to know what family photograph albums mean, sure, collect a few and take them home, study them and work out that they present highly selective images of family life that are oppressive to women. If you want to know what they do, though, find out what gets done with them. How are they made (di Bello 2007), where are they stored, when are their contents altered (Tinkler 2008), how are they looked at, and above all, what happens when they are made, stored, revised and looked at (Rose forthcoming). How are those family snaps seen, how are they caressed, defaced, cropped and ignored, what subjectivities and relations are in the making as these things happen?

I cannot claim that this more ethnographic approach to visual events is superior to the new connoisseurship currently dominating visual culture studies. However, in its move away from an approach to visualities still based largely on parallels with language, and its insistence that looking is a social act among humans and between humans and other things, can give us a different sense of visual culture which relies less on visual objects and more on the processes which animate them and make them matter. Clearly such a methodological focus on practice has its own challenges, which I have not discussed here: for example, methods to access human encounters with visualised objects are difficult to formulate, and describing what practices are happening is far from being an innocent operation. Nonetheless, I would suggest that visual culture studies can only be enriched by experimenting with a practice-oriented methodology.

### **further reading**

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Larsen, J. 2008. "Practices and flows of digital photography: an ethnographic framework." *Mobilities* 3(1):141-160.

Rose, Gillian. forthcoming. *Doing Family Photography: The Domestic, The Public, and The Politics of Sentiment*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

## endnotes

- 1 Bal's essay seems to use the terms 'method' and 'methodology' interchangeably. Since 'method' tends usually to refer to more technical questions of analytical procedure, my sense is that she actually centres methodology in her work. However, since part of my argument is to emphasise the more procedural aspects of method as a consequence of considering methodology, I too shift between using these two terms in this paper.
- 2 The phrase 'compressed performance' comes from Nicholas Pinney's paraphrase of Marilyn Strathern's work (Pinney 2004).
- 3 For example, in the opening pages of her 2003 essay she refers approvingly to the work of Arjun Appadurai (1986), who is also very influential on the work of those anthropologists I mention, particularly Thomas (1991). Similarly, in her edited collection *The Practice of Cultural Analysis* (Bal, 1999), she works with an essay contributed by distinguished anthropologist Johannes Fabian.
- 4 Sturken and Cartwright seem to reference only two authors (both North American) that have contributed to audience studies: Janice Radway and Constance Penley. There is no sustained discussion of the British school of audience studies initiated by people such as David Morley, Charlotte Brunsden and Ann Gray.
- 5 Even in the case of 'new genre public art' (Lacey, 1995), with its commitment to 'community involvement', there's still a tendency for artists to be the ones with the ideas while local people are simply asked to do the work. Indeed, this is the basis of Miwon Kwon's (2004) fairly devastating account of a major new genre public art project in Chicago a few years ago.

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